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Matter of Fact

By Joseph Alsop

Dialogue of the Deaf?

ALEXEI KOSYGIN has spoken. President Johnson has spoken. Israel's Foreign Minister, Abba Eban, has spoken with great brilliance and wit. God knows how many more people are to speak. But one can be sure that hysteria and unreason, disinterested calm, woolly-minded waffling and active malice will all find voices before the end.



Alsop

Meanwhile, no one can tell, as yet, whether this is to be another "dialogue of the deaf," all the noisier because neither side really hears the other. For no one has as yet managed to make a firm and persuasive judgment of Soviet intentions; and nothing but a rational Soviet approach to the Middle Eastern crisis can prevent the worst sort of outcome.

Even Premier Kosygin's speech offered few clues to the American Kremlinologists. He said all the hard things he had been expected to say, both about this country and about Israel. But he said them in a relatively calm tone; and he did not shut the door on a future encounter with the President. Thus "wait and see" has to be the motto for the present.

WHILE WAITING for clearer auguries, however, it is worth covering two points with much bearing on Prime Minister Kosygin's descent upon the United Nations. The first concerns the inconceivable error of the Soviet intelligence estimate of Arab, and especially of Egyptian military capabilities.

If the Central Intelligence Agency had made a comparable error, every editorial page in this country would now be a howling

blood of CIA Director Richard Helms. (Whereas no one has taken much public note of the brilliantly accurate forecasts the intelligence analysts actually gave President Johnson.) Why then did the Soviet intelligence go so wrong?

The answer, the analysts have concluded, is that the Soviets went so wrong about their Egyptian and other Arab clients for almost exactly the same reason that the North Vietnamese are always so wrong about U. S.

casualties in the Vietnamese war.

Scores of captured documents reveal that Communist unit commanders in Vietnam simply report American casualties at a level that will justify the casualties their own units have suffered. They have no alternative, for if they do not enormously inflate our losses, they will lose their jobs. The inflation is for self-protection, in fact.

The members of the Soviet training missions in Egypt and Syria were in the same position, in some sense, as a North Vietnamese unit commander who is given orders that he cannot successfully execute. In other words, these Soviet officers' masters in the Kremlin had decided the Egyptians and the Syrians were to be given viable and effective armed forces; and they were investing vast sums for this purpose. How then could the members of the Soviet training mission report to the Kremlin that the Egyptian army was in fact quite worthless?

FOR THIS REASON, the Kremlin was brutally and horribly surprised by what happened. On this, all American students of Soviet affairs are approximately agreed. And all agree, too, that the sheer bitterness of the surprise further inflamed the previously existing division in the Kremlin, which may be described as

Except that Prime Minister Kosygin is rather plainly one of the leaders of the practical men, no one outside the Kremlin's wall is quite clear about the names and numbers of the players. Even Leonid Brezhnev is sometimes put in one faction and sometimes in the other.

But it is quite clear, nonetheless, that all current Soviet decisions about foreign affairs, and even, in many cases, about internal matters, represent compromises between these two groups. Sometimes, it is believed, the compromises are even extremely uneasy and precarious.

IN THE Middle Eastern crisis, the ideologues obviously wish to do everything possible to inflame the Arabs against Israel and the Western powers. Their program must certainly include renewing the immense investments in Arab armed forces, which have just been

proved so wasteful. As the Economist of London has remarked, this can too easily amount to handing the choice between peace and third world war to such men as Gamal Abdel Nasser.

By the same token, the practical men obviously wish to act, not in concert with the United States, but at least in parallel with the United States, in order to tamp down the passions that are now ablaze in the Middle East, and thus to reduce the risks of a future war. This is, in fact, the only way toward peace and progress. And taking this road would have to include sharp limits of Soviet Middle Eastern arms shipments.

Which side in the Kremlin will win the argument? None as I can predict.